

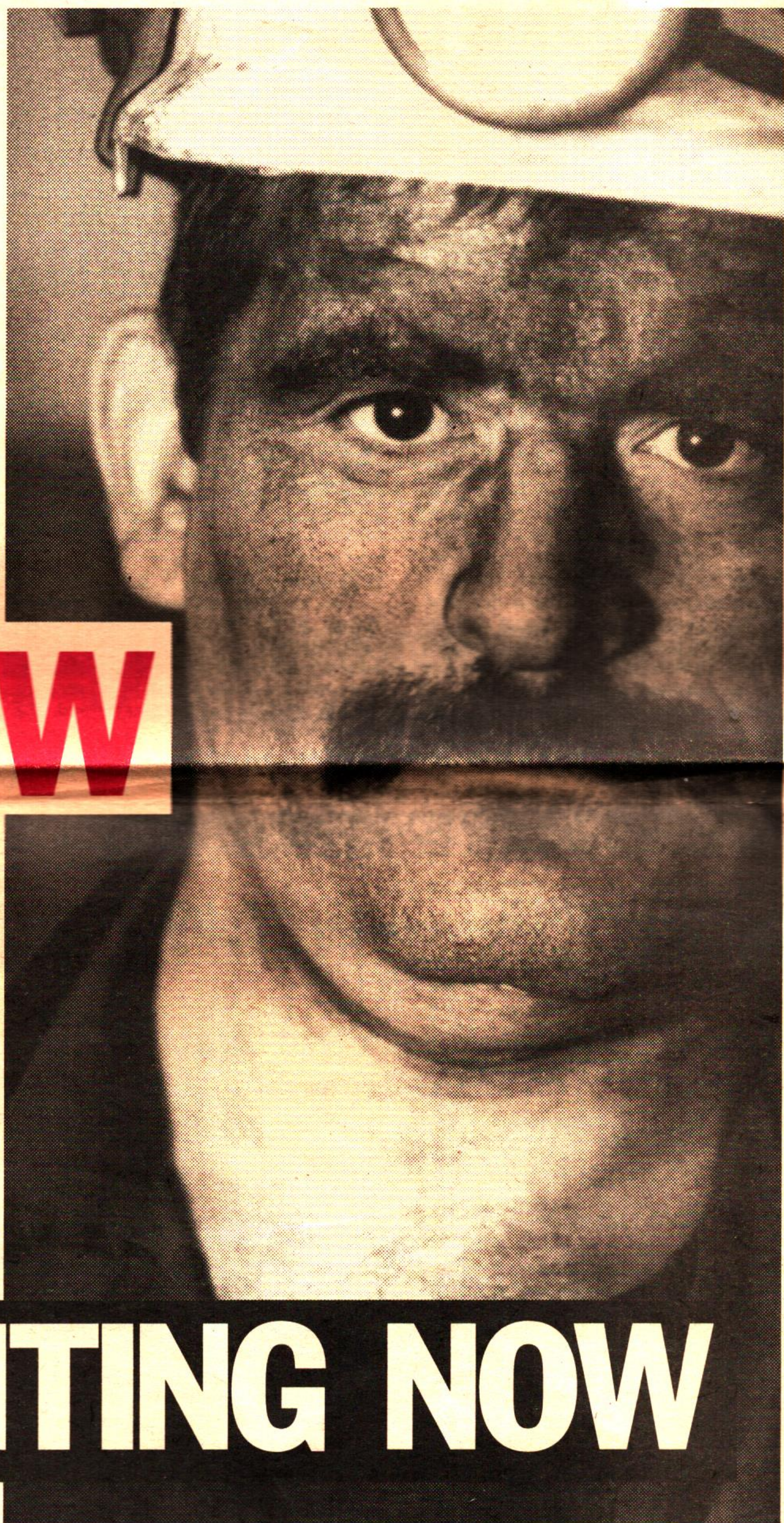
the next step

Bulletin of the Revolutionary Communist Party

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TODAY THE MINERS

TOMORROW THE REST OF US



START FIGHTING NOW

The government's eleventh-hour decision to phase-in the closure of 31 pits has brought no comfort to the 30 000 miners still set to lose their jobs. Nor has it brought any comfort to the three million people already on the dole, nor to the 200 000 others expected to join them before the end of the year. It is merely a public relations job to appease dissident Tory backbenchers.

The widespread anger at the sacking of the miners gives us an opportunity to take a stand, not just against the pit closures, but against all redundancies. But to do that we need a new strategy for action.

Trying to appear moderate and reasonable in the hope of winning the support of Tory MPs or sympathetic vicars will get us nowhere. The government might have made a tactical retreat in the face of backbench opposition, but it has not altered its determination that we must pay the price of their slump. The Tory MPs who humiliated Michael Heseltine are the same people who for a decade have supported to the hilt the policy of privatisation and public expenditure cuts. They are the same people who at the Tory Party conference demanded a tough new austerity

programme from the government. They have no interest in defending our jobs and living standards.

Public sympathy will not stop redundancies either. In recent years, groups of workers such as nurses and ambulance staff have relied on public sympathy rather than industrial muscle to win their demands. They certainly gained support from the public—but they lost their battles with the government. If we are to stop the coming redundancies we must take decisive action to defend our jobs and livelihoods. That means making common cause not with Tory MPs or middle class do-gooders

but with other workers whose livelihoods are threatened by government policy.

Teachers, health workers, council staff—they are next in line after the miners. We need to work out how we can act in concert to stop the government's job-cutting plans. We need to establish the unity across workplaces and unions that can give us the strength to stand up to the Tories. And we need to win the arguments for the kind of hard-hitting industrial action that can force the Tories to back down. If we are going to stop the job cuts—we need to start the fightback now.

The politics of pity

Appeals for public sympathy with the miners as the helpless victims of the Tory government are not only patronising, they are a useless way of defending jobs.

'Old men—or men made old—doubled over by the effects of pneumoconiosis on their lungs. Barrel chests stained blue with coal dust tattoos. Sad-eyed pit ponies and the song of pale canaries in dark cages. Welsh choirs and brass bands. The Durham Miners Gala and the Workers' Education Trust....Among the commuters, the plight of the miners has displaced the citizens of Sarajevo as the week's good cause.' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 18 October)

The bitterly reactionary, pro-Tory, *Sunday Telegraph* expressed its sympathies for the miners in terms that have echoed through the British media over the past week. Depicted as the threatened specimens of Hovis-advert proletarian heritage or as pathetic casualties of economic misfortune, the miners have become the object of a wave of middle class condescension and the sort of charitable sentiment usually reserved

for victims of distant famine or war. But miners don't want pity, charity or cultural conservation—they want jobs.

The irony that the disaffected Tory MP Winston Churchill should emerge as the new champion of the miners against the government has not been lost on the mining communities. Churchill's grandfather and namesake was detested by generations of miners as the home secretary who, in 1910, despatched both troops and police to crush striking miners in Tonypandy in South Wales.

The contrast reflects the dramatic change in the public perception of the miners in British society. When the miners were well organised and militant, they were hated and feared by all sections of the British establishment and the middle classes. It is only since the defeat of the 1984-85 strike, and the effective destruction of the miners' union and its

militant traditions, that it has become safe to patronise the miners and the mining communities.

The solidarity forged in oppressive labour relations, dangerous working conditions, and close, often isolated, communities has given the miners their historic position as one of the most strongly unionised and militant sections of the British working class. In particular in the turbulent years around the First World War, the miners were in the vanguard of the labour movement. They were the core of the Triple Alliance (with rail and transport workers) and the main force in the 1926 General Strike. It would be difficult to find a Tory MP or a Tory newspaper expressing anything but the fiercest hostility and contempt for the miners through this period.

During the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, too, public opinion showed little sympathy for the miners. When the miners' industrial action successfully brought down Edward Heath's Conservative government and won substantial wage rises, there was not a glimmer of a pro-miners backbench revolt. The Tory tabloids and their more respectable media colleagues kept up a relentless barrage of abuse against the miners' pickets and their militant leaders.

In the early stages of the 1984-85 dispute, when there was still some chance of victory, public opinion was unreservedly hostile towards the miners and particularly towards their militant tactics. But the longer the strike dragged on and larger loomed the inevitability of defeat, so public sympathy increased. Once the prospect of working class solidarity action had receded, the middle class charitable impulse increased and collections for miners' families struck a popular chord. How the middle classes love to relate to the working class as passive recipient of their munificence!

The current outpouring of sentimental tributes to the miners reveals the

consequences of the 1985 defeat. Tory politicians and newspaper columnists have hailed the National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) strategy of trying to flatter public opinion while making no attempt to organise militant industrial action. The Nottinghamshire-based Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM)—itself a scab union resulting from the split in the NUM during the 1984-85 dispute—has emerged as a force of more or less equal status to the NUM. Now lacking any real union organisation capable of putting up more than token rhetorical resistance to pit closures, the miners are being patronised by every dissident Tory MP, tabloid editor, bishop, local vicar, and radical newspaper.

Those who counsel the advantages of winning public sympathy over the risks of industrial action should look at the fate of nurses, ambulance workers and other health service workers. In countless disputes in recent years representatives of these workers have appealed for—and won—enormous popular support. Yet, in the absence of effective action by the workers themselves, and no solidarity action from other workers, health workers have been crushed, public sympathy notwithstanding. Nurses are now being sacked on qualification in London while many continue to endure poor pay and conditions. Meanwhile the ambulance service has become so demoralised that there are almost daily reports of people dying while listening to a recorded message from the 999 service.

The lesson of history is that workers only get sympathy and charity from the establishment when they are crushed. On the other hand, the only way to win respect and concessions from the employers and the government is by fighting for it. The sooner the miners get back to being hated by the middle classes and lose their new-found patronising friends, the more likely they are to keep their jobs, their living standards and their dignity.

Scargill—wrong again

Many commentators claim that recent events have vindicated NUM leader Arthur Scargill's position in the 1984-85 strike. In fact, they confirm the disastrous consequences of the strategy he pursued then—and to which he still clings.

When Arthur Scargill last week announced that the NUM leadership had decided to suspend holding a ballot of its members about taking industrial action to stop pit closures in favour of appealing to public opinion and trying to foment splits among the Tories, there was a virtually universal chorus of approval. The contrast with 1984 was striking: then Scargill's refusal to hold a ballot in favour of sanctioning action on an area-by-area basis became the most controversial issue of the whole dispute. Three different positions emerged on the ballot issue.

The Tory government, the Labour leadership and most of the media condemned Scargill's refusal to hold a national ballot. They seized on this issue as a way of undermining the legitimacy of the dispute. They exploited the division that soon appeared between miners in areas immediately threatened by closures, who responded militantly, and those, particularly in the Nottinghamshire area, whose jobs were not then regarded as in jeopardy, who, in the majority, were inclined to remain at work. The result was that the division in the union deepened and consolidated, and the output from the Notts coalfield ensured that national power supplies were never threatened. Furthermore, the split in the miners' ranks

made it difficult to persuade other workers, particularly in transport, to take solidarity action. As a result, solidarity action was sporadic, uneven and generally, ineffective.

The left in general supported the Scargill position. It argued that militant miners were already taking action and that holding a ballot would simply hold things back, and risk giving the more moderate miners a veto over the continuation of the strike and the fight against closures. In fact, refusing to hold a ballot amounted to a bureaucratic evasion of a political problem: the Notts miners were continuing to work and were clearly unconvinced by the strategy of the NUM leadership. Ducking the ballot meant encouraging sectional militancy, which could not win, while ignoring sectional moderation, which could keep up supplies of coal.

The Revolutionary Communist Party argued in the early weeks of the strike that the only way to win was to organise an aggressive campaign in favour of all-out action for jobs around a national ballot. While the NUM leadership attempted to justify strike action on the grounds that this was in the interests of the British coal industry, we argued that the interests of the miners must come first. Only through such a campaign, we

argued, could the Notts miners be persuaded to come out and the fatal weakness of the strike be overcome:

'[The NUM's] economic arguments made no sense at all to the Notts miners. Anybody could see that there was a basic conflict between the miners' determination to save jobs and the employers' determination to make coal mining profitable. It was obvious to the Notts miners that a national strike would be damaging to the coal industry in Britain and in Nottinghamshire. They could never be persuaded to accept the view that a strike was good for the relatively prosperous Notts coal industry.' (*Our Day Will Come*)

It was obvious from the earliest stages of the dispute that if this argument was not carried in the course of the ballot campaign, then there was no prospect of a united national strike. Furthermore, if the miners could not achieve unity within their own ranks, they could little expect other workers to unite with them. Inevitably the same divisive sectional arguments were also influential among other unions, with similar consequences. When Scargill, backed by the left, successfully manoeuvred to block a ballot, the prospects for victory dis-



appeared, even though the strike dragged on for many more months.

One of the most demoralising aspects of the ultimate defeat was that militant miners were inclined to blame other miners who drifted back to work earlier, or workers in other unions, or even themselves. Through his skilful manoeuvring and his militant rhetoric, Scargill managed to emerge relatively unscathed. What was even worse was that his policy of tying miners' livelihoods to the viability of the British coal industry also went largely unquestioned.

Today Scargill is still riding high, though now he presides over a decimated union which for the first time in history enjoys the patronage of Tories, bishops and tabloid editors. Making essentially the same plea for miners jobs in terms of the profitability of the British mining industry, he now appeals for support within the establishment rather than attempting to use the lever of industrial action. Yet the lowering of horizons is also striking: while in 1984 the miners set out to mobilise industrial action against all pit closures, in 1992 the discussion is about mobilising Tory backbenchers for a slightly longer consultation period. The main complaint now is not about the closures, but about the manner of the announcement and the pace of events.

From Maastricht to the miners Why the Tories are in crisis

Anger at the pit closures is the product of wider disaffection with government policy. But we cannot defend miners' jobs if we allow Tory MPs to take the lead in the campaign against redundancies.

Winston Churchill, Rhodes Boyson and Dame Jill Knight are among the last people you would expect to support the miners. Like many of the current Tory dissidents, they are on the right wing of the party, many of them diehard Thatcherites, and all of whom have over the past decade supported the policies of privatisation, mass unemployment and public expenditure cuts. They gave their full support to the Tory government's frontal assault on mining communities during the 1984-85 strike. So why have they taken up the miners' cause?

The Tory opposition to the government's programme of pit closures has got nothing to do with the miners themselves. Rather, the issue of the pit closures has become the catalyst for broader disaffection both within the establishment and the public at large.

The government's troubles stem from the sense of political malaise that is gripping the ruling class. The double whammy of the slump and the end of the Cold War has disoriented the mainstream political parties throughout the Western world. For 40 years of the Cold War, anti-communism acted as an ideological glue, binding Western societies together against the common enemy of the Soviet Union, and giving a sense of mission to the West. The demise of the old East-West divide has removed this artificial means of winning political allegiance in the West. The consequence has been to destabilise traditional political allegiances and to create a swell of popular discontent with mainstream politicians.

This problem has been exacerbated by the impact of the slump, which has had a grievous impact on the lives of ordinary people throughout the world. The end of the Cold War might have destroyed, for many people, the possibility of any alternative to the market system, but the capitalist system itself is facing severe crisis. Over the past period it has become increasingly clear that the advanced capitalist nations are not simply experiencing a recession but a full-blown depression—an extended period of economic crisis with no sign of recovery. The impact of mass unemployment, huge government deficits, wild currency fluctuations, stock market crashes and the imposition of austerity programmes have all led to a perception of a system out of control. The inability of any Western government to find any answer to economic crisis has underscored the lack of direction and purpose felt in many Western societies.

The combination of political disorientation and economic crisis has created a widespread sense of grievance and insecurity in society and a deep resentment towards the established political elites and movements which appear responsible for the current predicament. In America, popular disaffection looks set to cost George Bush the presidential election and has created a bandwagon around the maverick outsider Ross Perot. In France, the public support for the lorry drivers strike earlier this year expressed the strength of public

disenchantment. In Italy such disenchantment has led to the rapid growth of the separatist and racist Lega Nord.

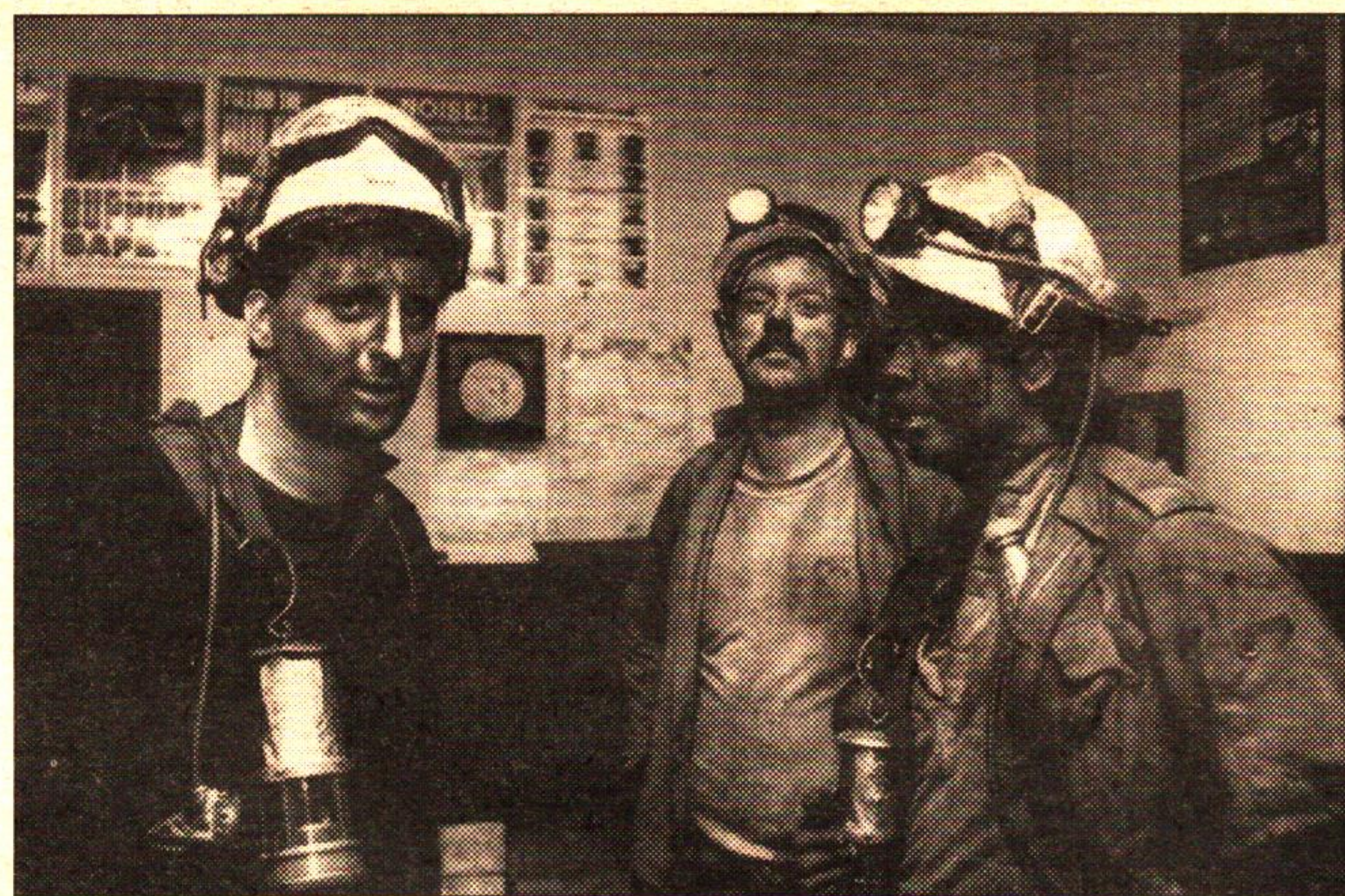
But while there is a widespread sense of grievance, it is inchoate and unfocused. In this context almost any issue has the potential to become a source of discontent. The Maastricht treaty was one such issue. The popular opposition to Maastricht, as revealed by the Danish and French referenda, was less a verdict on European integration than a rejection of all mainstream politics. As *Guardian* journalist Martin Woolcott observed, 'if they held a referendum on joining the moon, no doubt the result would be the same' (22 September 1992).

It is in this context that we need to understand the opposition to the pit closures. Until recently many people felt that Britain was exempt from the kind of political instability that has rent much of the Western world. No longer. The sterling crisis has acted as a catalyst in transforming people's perceptions of the slump. Black Wednesday, when the government was forced to pull sterling out of the ERM, was a profound shock to many people and brought home the reality of Britain's disaster economy. Since then the plummeting of the pound, the continual stream of redundancies, the record number of bankruptcies and the spectacle of a government without leadership or policy has created fierce resentment over the impact of the economic crisis. These resentments boiled over at the announcement of the pit closure programme.

The extent of the Tory revolt has been embarrassing for the government and could yet be terminal for the political ambitions of Michael Heseltine. Yet the anti-Tory Toryism holds an even greater danger for us, because it has allowed the right wing to claim the moral high ground on the issue of the slump.

The only opposition to government policy today comes from within the Tory Party. Neither the Labour Party nor the trade union movement have been able to take advantage of the worst Tory crisis for more than a generation. Instead all the running has been made by Tory dissidents. This has allowed Tory backbenchers to appear as the champions of the miners. They have been able to present themselves as the ones who understand the fears of working class communities devastated by the slump and as the politicians who can force the government to accede to working class demands. The result is that the widespread disaffection with Tory policies has been channelled into support for Tory politicians who have no differences in principle with government ministers.

The climbdown by Heseltine has reinforced the view that middle class Tory pressure is the best—and indeed only—way to wring concessions from the government. Yet what concession did Winston Churchill and his compatriots win for the miners? The government has agreed not to be so precipitate in its sacking of the miners. Neither the miners' jobs nor those of hundreds of thousands



of other public sector workers are safe. Looking to Tory dissidents to fight our battles means accepting that we can never defend our jobs and living standards.

To take real advantage of the difficulties in which the government finds itself, we need to provide a class focus for the disaffection that people feel, and to demonstrate how we can fight for jobs and living standards. The decimation of miners' jobs has been presented as a national disaster. It is not. The pit closures

are a disaster for our class, inflicted by the capitalists in their attempt to salvage their system. Nor is the closure programme an isolated incident; it is rather part of a much broader onslaught on working class jobs and living standards. We cannot repulse that onslaught by trying to be respectable and appealing to middle England's charitable impulse. We can only do so by standing up for our rights and taking whatever action is necessary to defend our class.

Action not sympathy

The successful defence of jobs in the pits and elsewhere depends on industrial action and solidarity support to force employers and the government to back down. Now is the time to build a movement capable of mobilising and coordinating such action.

Trade union leaders and opposition politicians have put the emphasis on respectability and moderation, on signing petitions and organising well-behaved protests. That is a sure way of marching to defeat. The lesson of every trade union dispute has been that moderation does not pay. Furthermore, appeasing Tory demands for respectability can only help to strengthen government resolve in coming battles—such as those with public sector workers.

Any concessions workers have wrung from the authorities, they have done so only through struggle. This is clear by looking at past victories. In 1972, for example, the miners won a famous victory against the Tory government by taking militant action, organising flying pickets to shut down sites such as Saltley Gates coke depot in Birmingham, and by being willing to defy the law. Victory was also achieved through successful solidarity action, as transport and other workers joined miners in stopping the movement of coke and coal.

Today, only similar resolve and militancy can prevent job cuts in the pits and elsewhere. The precise kind of action we need now will have to be worked out during the course of struggle. It might involve solidarity strikes, pit occupations, secondary picketing, guerilla action like blocking the movement of fuel, and so on. But the central aim must be to take action that can put maximum pressure on the government.

To create hard-hitting solidarity action we need to win the arguments for support from wider groups of workers. Rail workers, power workers, health workers—all have a common interest in backing the miners. We need to win the argument first that the miners' fight is our fight—not in the sense that they require charitable support, but in the sense that we will all face the same fate as the miners unless we stand together. We need to win the argument too that solidarity means not extending sympathy but taking decisive industrial action that can bring the government to its knees.

Current workplace and union structures serve to divide us along sectional lines and make it harder to win such arguments. To build any solidarity we need therefore to create new networks which can link workers in different jobs, workplaces and unions. Through such a strategy we can begin to build a wider movement, which can challenge not simply the programme of pit closures but the broader problems that we face—from the Tories' new austerity drive to issues such as racism and militarism.

Some on the left have called for a general strike to back the miners. It would be a great achievement if we could mobilise such power behind the miners. But there is a great difference between calling for a general strike and creating the conditions in which such a show of solidarity could take place. Calling for a general strike in the abstract is an evasion of the real tasks involved in building effective support for the miners. Who, for example, would organise such a strike? The TUC? Asking Norman Willis to call a general strike is like asking Madonna to run a convent. Such calls now will simply ensure that the opposition to the government's plans remains in the hands of the likes of Winston Churchill.

Building any kind of solidarity means organising action ourselves. We cannot avoid the hard graft involved in building a new and effective opposition to the Tories.

The price of the market

From a capitalist point of view, the pit closures are rational. If we want to stop the redundancies, we must reject the logic of the market.

'The economics of the madhouse.' That is how critics have described the government's decision to shut down two-thirds of Britain's pits. Some back-bench Tory rebels, such as Winston Churchill, claim that the British coal industry is more efficient and productive than foreign industry. Others argue that electricity generated from coal is cheaper than that generated from gas. The decimation of the coal industry, they say, is irrational.

In fact, the pit closures result from the economics, not of the madhouse, but of the capitalist market. From the capitalist point of view there is nothing irrational about throwing 30 000 miners out of work. As chancellor Norman Lamont has remarked, for the capitalist class unemployment 'is a price well worth paying' in the cause of restoring profits.

The capitalist market only provides a job when it is profitable to do so. In a period of boom, industrialists are able to make profits relatively easily and hence there is a high level of employment. In a recession, when profits are squeezed, employers shut down operations and throw their workforce on to the scrapheap.

British workers have suffered particularly badly because of the backward, decrepit nature of Britain's economy. The unproductive state of British industry has made it uncompetitive on the world market, reducing profits further. The government has responded by allowing the more backward sectors of industry to go to the wall, cutting swathes through industry and putting millions on the dole. The Tories had hoped that by getting rid of the more unproductive enterprises, they would end up with a 'leaner but fitter' economy. However the depth of Britain's economic malaise is such that the weeding out process has helped destroy virtually the whole of Britain's manufacturing base.

The coal industry is no different from any other sector of the capitalist economy. As far as the employers are concerned, the sole purpose of coal mining is to maximise profits. Where pits are unprofitable, or insufficiently profitable, they are shut down. Like much of the rest of British industry, most of the coal mines are technologically backward and unprofitable and hence unviable in capitalist terms. The criterion of profitability has forced British Coal (and before it the National Coal Board) to shut down much of its operations, and to throw 700 000 miners out of work in the past 40 years. As British Coal's latest proposals show, the slump has accelerated the destruction of what little remains of Britain's coal industry.

Economic recession has not only laid waste to much of British industry, it has also forced the government to cut back on public expenditure. Public spending is a drain on private profits. The money for state spending comes from taxation which is largely a deduction from the profits of industry and commerce. Even personal taxation in the end comes out of profits, as workers tend to compensate for higher taxes by winning wage rises that maintain take-home pay.

In profitable times the capitalist class can afford to underwrite public spending. In a slump, the frailty of the economy means that they can no longer afford to do so. The reason that Britain, unlike Germany, does not subsidise its coal industry is not that British ministers are less rational than German officials, but that the British economy is far weaker.

Critics of the government's policy, from right-wing Tory rebels to left-wing mineworkers' leaders, might cavil at the impact of the pit closures but virtually all accept the strictures of the market. All are agreed that the market is the only way to organise society. All accept that the aim of the government's industrial policy



must be to make Britain productive and competitive on the world market. But the only way to do this is the way that has already been marked out by the Tories—by cutting jobs, and making the remaining workers work harder for less.

Throughout its existence, the NUM has tried to defend jobs by making an economic case for the coal industry. And throughout that time it has been forced to accept job losses and productivity increases as a price for the maintenance of a profitable industry. During the bitter 1984-85 strike, the NUM, under the leadership of Arthur Scargill, made the centrepiece of its fight the defence, not of miners' jobs, but of the *Plan for Coal*, a joint government-Coal Board-NUM strategy for the coal industry drawn up in 1974. But under the plan, nearly 100 pits had been shut during the previous decade. The NUM policy of defending a capitalist strategy for the coal industry divided the miners and fatally weakened the strike (see p2).

Since the miners' strike, both the NUM and its bitter rival, the UDM, have accepted the need to raise productivity to record levels to maintain a viable industry. This has meant continued pit closures, together with speed-ups for those left with jobs. But, as the latest closure plans show, capitalists are not sentimental about their workforce; however many sacrifices workers may make in the interests of viability, if an operation is not sufficiently profitable, employers have no compunction about closing it down.

There can be no rational economic arguments against pit closures. Economic arguments are by definition arguments

that are consistent with capitalist economics—in other words, arguments that are consistent with the interests of the capitalists. And the capitalists themselves are the best judges of what is in their interests.

Trying to prove that pit closures are uneconomic can only mean trying to demonstrate to the capitalists that there is a different means of making profits—in other words, a different way of exploiting the workforce. Take, for example, the argument that electricity produced from coal is cheaper than electricity produced by gas. If this were true it might save the jobs of a few thousand miners—but equally, gas workers, who would now be working for an unprofitable industry, would find themselves on the dole.

The argument that pit closures do not make economic sense is self-defeating. Linking jobs to the state of the industry for which we work allows the laws of the market and the account books of the employers to determine our living standards. Our starting point should not be the need to make industry profitable or viable, but the need to survive in this society. Capitalists do not make their decisions according to the consequences for workers. So why should we care about their ability to make a profit? Whether the pits are profitable or not, whether British coal is cheaper or dearer than imported coal, is irrelevant to the needs of miners. What miners need is a decent job at a living wage—regardless of the state of British Coal's books. That means fighting for every job irrespective of the state of their profits.

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